CLARKE

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TREATISE ON THE GROWTH
OF THE HORNS OF THE RED DEER

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BY

J. CLARKE,

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THE NATURALIST.

THE GROWTH OF THE HORNS

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RED DEER,

BY J. CLARKE, LYNTON.

Various accounts have been written respecting the red deer; but as controversies on the subject of the growth of the horns arise from time to time, I am induced to present the following observations, although they will be found to vary very materially from what has been written by others who are considered good authorities. The best description, and nearest the truth which I have yet met with, is in the eighth volume of the Penny Cyclopædia, published by Charles Knight & Co., in the year 1838. This however is not exactly correct, for, in the first place, it states that the horns of a male red deer do not appear till his second year, whereas they do appear in his first year as a knob, or single straight horn, varying in length from one to nine inches, but are not shed until he is twenty months old.

The formation of horns commences by an increase

of blood through the arterial circulation, as has been correctly stated by John Hunter in his work on the blood, and copied into the Penny Cyclopædia, but this is a part of the subject, which I need not dwell on, and beg to refer the reader to the work named for further information. Shortly after shedding the first horns, the formation of the second takes place according to the same process, and these are shed in the latter end of April or beginning of May, when they will have attained a length of nearly two feet, or perhaps more; these in turn drop off, to be again renewed, and thus the same process is continued for a series of years, except some casualty should happen to his head, or generative powers, whereby the growth of horns becomes immediately arrested, as has been clearly and satisfactorily proved.

Several years since there came into my possession a young male red deer, only a few days old. Just then the Rev. J. Boyce, (or as he was familiary termed stag-hunter Boyce,) happened to pass through Lynton, on his journey to Porlock, and I had some conversation with him respecting stag-hunting and the red deer. Knowing him to be the oldest stag-hunter, and one who had been present at more deaths of the wild red deer in the county than any other living being, I in the course of conversation, asked him whether he could tell, or if he thought it possible for any one to tell the age of a stag by his horns. His answer was prompt and decisive—"no." I then told him that I had a young male red

deer, and that I intended to keep him for the sole purpose of ascertaining and proving the question. He said that this was the only way in which the different ages could be possibly ascertained, as no two persons could be found to agree on the subject. At the time that this deer was in my possession, I had an opportunity, which I doubt if any one will again possess, of frequently seeing together a herd of from fifty to eighty, or more, red deer of all ages (then harboured and protected on Brendon Barton and Scobhill, by the late Mr. Knight, of Exmoor,) and which would allow a person on horseback to approach quite close to them, so that I could distinctly trace the growth of the horns of the different animals there assembled, and contrast them with the one in my own possession. This opportunity I frequently embraced, and consequently I consider myself to have been in a position to give more correct information than any person who has yet written on the subject, and the result of my experience I will now proceed to state.

In the first year of the stag's life there appears a single straight horn, or it may be merely a knob, varying from one to nine inches in length. In the second year he may have what is termed in Devonshire his "brow," "bay," and "tray," which are called antlers; but frequently there is an absence of one or the other of these, and when this is the case I have observed that it continues as he advances in years, and that the points on the top are diminished accord-

ingly. But I must here remark that the points will not alone serve as a guide to his age, although by a combination of these and other marks, as I shall hereafter state, it may be ascertained. In short, I defy any individual who has merely followed the hounds, and been present at the death, I care not how many times, to tell the age of a stag by his horns only.

I have myself followed the hounds for a great number of years, and been present at many a death, and I can safely say that I have frequently heard the most ridiculous arguments as to his age, some asserting him to be three or four years old, and others saying he is ten and upwards. For my own part, of late years I have not seen a stag of ten years old, nor do I think that any one in the county can shew me one—that they do live at the age of ten and upwards I do not for one moment dispute, but if any one possesses a head of a stag of that age, I should very much like to see it. Another error which I have frequently heard persons assert is, that they know him to be an old stag, because he is hoop horned; but are these individuals aware, or will they believe, that this is not a mark of old age, but of youth, as most of the male red deer, from two to three years old, are what they call hoop horned.

But now the question comes. Can a stag's age be known by his head? I believe he can up to a certain period, but only by those who have studied it; the latest publications, wherein it is said that a male deer has no horns in his first year, are in error, as I

have already remarked—and the statement appears to me to have been copied from older writers, where the same error has been committed. But when the first two or three years of the animals life have been so confounded, is it to be wondered at that mistakes should arise as to his age? It has also been asserted that an animal which has been kept in a park or paddock will at three years old present the appearance of a stag four, or even six, years old, but this is likewise incorrect. The one I had was kept, as is well known, for nearly seven years in a dry land field facing the south, of less than one acre, with a shed for him to go into, with not a drop of water in the field, nor ever having any given him *(and no artificial food)*, nothing but the natural grass of the field. When he was first put into this field there was a small mow of hay in one corner, which remained there two years; as he never touched it, it was taken away and given to cattle. This animal therefore, lived under great disadvantage, having nothing but the same piece of land to graze over year after year, summer and winter, so that he was not (as has been misrepresented) kept highly fed, but the contrary, the purpose being to see the natural growth of the horns. And what has the experiment proved? that the character and growth of the horns depend almost entirely on the natural disposition of the animal; otherwise how can it be accounted for that one in his wild and natural state shall have a splendid head, with all his rights,

and another quite the contrary? If it is owing to either or both of the parents, there surely must have been as fine heads as the one I possess; but then, I ask, what has become of them? for my own part I know not where to find one.

I will now give some particulars of the head and horns in my possession, with some remarks thereon.

Before the animal was one year old, the horns began to appear, about the latter end of May. In the following April these were shed, when they were nine inches long. A very short time afterwards, others began to be developed, and, in the latter end of April following, these were also shed, though not both on the same day. These had "brow," "bay," and "tray," with upright—altogether upwards of two feet in length. In *his third* year he had the same kind of antlers, with two points on top on one horn, and two and an offer on the other. In *his fourth* year, antlers as before, with two points and an offer on each horn. In *his fifth* year, antlers the same, with three points on each top. In *his sixth* year, antlers as before, with four points on each top. In *his seventh* year (when he was killed) antlers as before, though on one horn the points were not so perfect as in his sixth year. It will thus be seen this deer had seven on each horn, making together fourteen.

I do not think there is much difference in the points, &c., up to ten years of age, but the beam increases in size, antlers, &c., in length. After that age,

I believe the horns get shorter and wider at the spread.

In judging a stag's age, it must be borne in mind that, by the increase of the base of the horn or coronet, and projection of the burr, with the size of the beam, the greater distinctness of the superficial furrows, together with the length of the antlers and number of points, a stag's age may be nearly ascertained, but then only up to a certain period.

The head and horns of the animal just spoken of were exhibited at the Bath and West of England Agricultural Show, held at Barnstaple in 1859.

It has been stated that the hind brings forth her calf in May or June, but as far as I have been able to ascertain, she does not drop her calf until July or August; at all events the one I had was not dropped until the latter end of August.

As my sole purpose in publishing this treatise is to correct statements which have been hitherto published respecting the growth of the horns, with the antlers, and number of points, I have not thought proper to enter on the mode of hunting the red deer, as practised in Somerset and Devon, and have in addition only to observe, if any one doubts the statements I have advanced, let him procure some male calves, and rear them as I have done this one, and by close observation, he will then see whether I am in error, and if so, where. Surely there are plenty of persons in the world possessing the means, provided they have the will and

inclination, to keep and study the red deer, respecting which there yet remains a great deal to be learnt. There certainly is not a more noble creature existing than a seven or eight year old stag (with all his rights—which, by the bye, is not now to be seen,) especially on his first being roused and breaking covert, just after he has lost his velvet, which takes place early in September. Indeed it is a sight which must be witnessed to be described; and the pursuit of such an animal is well worthy of Royalty, as it was wont to be in ancient times.

I last season witnessed a most splendid chase of several hours, after which the stag was taken in a bedroom at Minehead, and I was somewhat surprised on viewing his head—having a brow and bay, no tray, with three points on top of one horn, and two on the other—to find his beam small, and antlers short, while the horn was of a dark colour. Now, how can this be accounted for? I believe from the following: a few years since I was informed that a number of red deer (which I then understood were foreign, but have since learnt were from Cheshire) were procured and set free among the different herds of wild deer in Devon and Somerset. These stags (for I believe they were mostly, if not all, male deer,) had shorter horns with generally only a brow and bay, and of a dark colour. I once saw a pair of their horns, but they bore no comparison to those I had hitherto had under my inspection. Why, or for what reason the animals

were obtained and so mixed, I know not. (Query.) Were those animals of a larger frame? if so their horns were very inferior. Those above described, derived their dark colour, I have not the least doubt, from the imported stock. This will make a vast difference in the horns and head of the future stags, and much further investigation will be required towards settling the question, so as to be able to judge of a stag's age by his horns; for in my opinion this cross will always continue to be more or less marked, just as various marks may be seen in sheep and cattle, when the breed has been crossed. Does it not tend to prove it is in the natural disposition of the animal. Surely it cannot be said it is owing to his keep or pasturage, or age; for as I have before stated, the number of antlers which a stag has in his second year, continues throughout the growth of the horns, and the ones he is then deficient of he never regains; so that if he has his brow, bay, and tray, they will continue to be developed in the same manner, though there may be some slight variation in them, and possibly in each of them. If he has only his brow and bay, he never gets a tray, nor does he get a bay if he has only had brow and tray in his second year—this I believe to be strictly correct, as far as my observations have been carried.

Having said this much as regards a stag's head, horns, &c., I feel bound to bestow my humble meed of praise on the present pack of stag-hounds latterly hunting the counties of Devon and Somerset, and also to add that

the greatest credit is due both to Babbage the huntsman, and Arthur the whip, for the command which they have over their hounds, and likewise for the manner of hunting them. Indeed it is a sight worth riding miles to witness; and in conclusion I wish them health and strength, with plenty of deer, and support for many years to come.

I certainly differ from some who fancy the red deer must soon be exterminated, for I believe if the landed proprietors in Devon and Somerset would unite and fence off certain portions of waste land, together with sufficient quantities of woodland and plantations, where the deer may be harboured, and not disturbed by sheep-dogs or poachers, that there may be always plenty of deer.

The farmers also in these counties ought to consider, where hunting is practised, that it not only gives a stimulus for rearing and breeding good horses, but also if I may be allowed the expression, will be the means of bringing "grist to the mill."

That the deer are not generally such close feeders as some have represented, I think, will appear from the small space of ground the one I had was kept in, though in their wild and free state, they have a much larger space to roam over, and feed at their will.

Dated, Lynton, July, 1866.

A. P. WOOD, PRINTER, HIGH-STREET, BARNSTAPLE.

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